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# Muḥammad's Disruptive Measures Against the Meccan Trade: A Historiographical Reassessment

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> *And somewhere or other, quite anonymous, there were the directing brains who coordinated the whole effort and laid down the lines of policy which made it necessary that this fragment of the past should be preserved, that one falsified, and the other rubbed out of existence.*
> George Orwell, *1984* (London, 1949)

**Abstract:** Muḥammad's disruptive measures against the Quraysh's commerce (exemplified in his looting the Meccan caravans) have commonly been considered to be of great importance in what brought about emerging Islam's prosperity. Whereas Islamicists have devoted a good deal of research to Muḥammad's antagonistic actions against the Meccan trade, previous studies can nonetheless be said to have mostly dealt with the traditional biography of Muḥammad with a receptive spirit. However, the *sīra* upon which we have to rely heavily, if not exclusively, is notorious for its source-critical problems. The extant theories are, hence, in need of reappraisal in the light of a more critical treatment of the sources.

**Keywords:** Meccan trade, the *sīra*, Battle of Badr, Islamic origins, early Islamic historiography, literary *topoi*

## Introduction

The humble creed adhered to by a few dozen persecuted Meccans at the turn of the seventh century not only proved to become a prosperous local politico-religious entity in a mere decade but was to make a profound impact on the whole Late Antique world in the years to come. This appears to have been startling enough a phenomenon to pique the curiosity of Islamicists. Muḥammad's antagonistic actions against the Quraysh's commerce have commonly been reckoned to be of paramount import in what enabled him to conquer Mecca, the very city that he

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and his followers once apprehensively fled.[1] Holding a receptive position to the *sīra*, one does not seem to have a daunting task before him or her for gauging the roots of early Islamic community's prosperity as there is a huge mass of reports purveying a wealth of hints on the Prophet's hostile policies toward the Quraysh and on his disrupting, through differing measures, Meccan trade. And it was the picture painted by this ostensibly revealing source material that constitutes the foundations on which a remarkable portion of the previous scholarship rest.[2] But the Islamic tradition that initially suggests itself to be fertile ground for the growth of sound scholarly hypotheses would prove, upon closer inspection, a mountain of spurious and slanted material. Those *au fait* with the historiography of formative Islam are well aware of the arguments presented against the reliability of the tradition.[3] I am particularly concerned in this essay with the *Quellenkritische* method pursued by Noth and Conrad, whose seminal studies fostered a great awareness about the abundance of literary devices in our sources.[4] It is crucial, they argue, to be acutely cognizant of the fact that the Islamic *akhbār*, far from being monolithic corpora, are combinations of transferrable narrative motifs (*Erzählmotive*) that can readily "drift" from one historical framework to another.[5] The traditional material must then be treated with a vigilant eye toward the rampant utilization of the literary *topoi* and their *underlying tendencies*, points that seem to be lacking in many studies that concern themselves with Muḥammad's anti-Quraysh measures. The conclusions made thereon are thus in need of reappraisal in the light of a literary assessment of the *sīra*.

Muḥammad's disturbing of the Quraysh's commerce was, according to the *sīra*, confined in the first three years of his Medinan career to looting the Meccan caravans, the missions in which he sporadically took part in person or for which he quite frequently dispatched his Companions.[6] On account of these incursions,

**1** Donner 1977, 249–266; Crone 1987, 165; Nagel 2010, 130.

**2** The relevant studies will be addressed in due course.

**3** See, for instance, Donner 1998, 1–5; Berg 2003, 259–290; Shoemaker 2011, 257–344; Motzki 2017, 9–19; Anthony 2020, 1–21.

**4** See, for example, Noth/Conrad 1994; Noth 2008, 241–262; Conrad, 1988, 42–73; Conrad 1992, 317–401. Noth and Conrad are indebted nevertheless to Stetter 1965.

**5** Noth/Conrad 1994, 109.

**6** Watt 1956, 2–9; Donner 1977, 256–257; Landau-Tasseron 1995, 303–307; Ibrahim 1990, 90; Heck 2003, 552–553; Athamina 2011; Donner 2012, 48; Nawas 2015. As Landau-Tasseron notes, most of the caravan raids are placed by the sources during the first three years of the Prophet's Medinan period, the raids of al-Īṣ in 6 AH and al-Khabaṭ (otherwise known as the expedition of Abī ʿUbayda to the seashore) in 8 AH being the exceptions. The latter expedition is *not* nevertheless a caravan raid in Ibn Isḥāq and al-Wāqidī's reports, but is so in al-Bayhaqī's account, al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil* (1985), IV, 406. Given the alleged chronology of the expedition, after the al-Ḥudaybiyya truce, it may be

says Donner, "the Meccans' trade with Syria had been virtually brought to a standstill" by the time of the al-Qarada expedition, to wit, the 27th month AH.[7] The Prophet's boycott of Mecca with the aid of his formal ally, Thumāma b. Uthāl, has likewise been regarded amongst Muḥammad's acrimonious measures toward the Quraysh's trade.[8] Finally, the interception following the al-Ḥudaybiyya pact of Meccan caravans by the Prophet's "informal" allies, Abū Baṣīr al-Thaqafī and his band,[9] has been enumerated among the factors that brought Mecca to its knees and eventuated its capitulation.[10] Taking a literary approach to the *sīra*, I shall deal in chronological order with these events' narratives and the relevant secondary literature. Through unveiling the true nature of our sources, I will examine what we are likely to know from the *sīra* about the issue of Muḥammad and the Meccan trade.[11]

## Before the Battle of Badr

Although a lucrative enterprise, caravan trade in the Near East has always been bereft of idyllic tranquility,[12] and this seems to have particularly been the case with Arabia.[13] Aside from the Arabic tradition, the consternation caused by caravan raids has clearly been reflected in a myriad of Near Eastern sources tracing back to the second millennium BCE.[14] Nearly a century before the beginning of Muḥammad's prophetic proclamation, according to Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite, the Roman Ṭayyāyē intercepted the caravan of the Lakhmid al-Nuʿmān, then "attacked and destroyed them (the Persian Ṭayyāyē), and seized the camels" (*wa-npal ʿlayhon wa-ḥrab ennon wa-l-gamlā šab*).[15] Plundering the Meccan caravans by or at the

said that Muḥammad could not have directly engaged in the incursion of the Meccan caravans. Al-Bayhaqī's report seems thus to be garbled.

**7** Donner 1977, 256.

**8** The hypothesis has been presented in Donner 1977, 252, and endorsed in Kister 1981, 251; Kister 2002, 10; Rubin 1988, 254, 258.

**9** On them, see below the section "The Hostile Activities of Muḥammad's Formal and Informal Allies."

**10** Donner 1977, 264; Donner 1979, 244; Rubin 1988, 252–254. On Abū Baṣīr's band, see also Görke 2000, 240–268.

**11** In addition to the reports of the *sīra*, the relevant material in the *ḥadīth* and *tafsīr* collections are also consulted.

**12** See Maraqten 1996, 216; Hoyland 2001, 39; Robin 2015, 115.

**13** Kister 1968, 149; Crone 1987, 147.

**14** See Maraqten 1996, 213.

**15** Trombley and Watt 2000, 69; see the Syriac text in Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle* (1882), 54.

behest of Muḥammad may, then, unmistakably be seen as the "continuation of this ancient Arabian practice."[16] This makes perfect sense, it has been proffered, taking into account Mecca's arid climate and its reliance for basic foodstuffs on short- and long-distance trade. Add to this the geographical propinquity to Medina of the coastal trade route that rendered the Meccan caravans all the more susceptible to the forays of their adversaries who were themselves once traders,[17] and thus well-informed of "the routes and places most convenient for attacks."[18] It should come as no surprise that we hear in the *sīra* of regular attacks by the Muslims on the Meccan caravans.[19]

The sources tend to agree, as do the modern scholars, upon the point that many of these early raids were of minor significance. Though being of a trivial character, asserts Watt, pillaging the caravans before the Battle of Badr was, nevertheless, not devoid of positive outcomes for the Prophet as the Muslims could augment their self-confidence through taking the offensive against the mighty Quraysh.[20] Likewise, Landau-Tasseron notes that these early invasions were by no means "impressive battles" and that the Muslims "often returned empty-handed." However, according to her, the experience Muḥammad and his followers gained in this period proved fruitful in the following years.[21] While acknowledging the "reconnaissance or harassment," and hence the paltry nature of many of the earlier expeditions, Donner lays emphasis on Muḥammad intercepting the "inbound caravans," a fact denoting the pursuit of a calculated attempt on the Prophet's part at "cutting off the very life-blood which kept Mecca alive."[22]

So far, so good: The image provided by the tradition sounds a coherent one, as do the contentions made by the modern scholars. But things are not as neat as may initially appear. Unlike what is sometimes supposed, the true character of many of the early expeditions is far from clear. As Landau-Tasseron herself observes, the *sariyya* led by Ḥamza b. ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib is said by al-Wāqidī to have been directed against a caravan, a point which is absent in the account of Ibn Hishām. She further states that ʿUbayda b. al-Ḥārith's expedition to al-Rābigh, a caravan raid in al-Wā-

16 Landau-Tasseron 1995, 306.

17 On the Quraysh as trading people, see Anthony 2020, 78–82. As for Muḥammad himself, however, Anthony contends that the *sīra-maghāzī* literature does not explicitly speak of his being a merchant, and that this is the occupation the Prophet is reputed for in seventh-century non-Muslim sources, Anthony 2020, 59–82.

18 Landau-Tasseron 1995, 307.

19 Watt 1956, 2; Donner 1977, 251, 256; Athamina 2011.

20 Watt 1956, 2–3.

21 Landau-Tasseron 1995, 306–307.

22 Donner 1977, 256.

qidī's report, is said by Ibn Hishām to have met a "Qurashī party, not necessarily a caravan."[23] As Crone has already underlined, the caravan lootings recorded in al-Wāqidī's *maghāzī* are, in fact, flagrantly more numerous than those preserved by Ibn Isḥāq (and the same can be said if one compares al-Wāqidī's accounts with those of Mūsā b. ʿUqba[24]). "And if the number of caravans involved increased at the same exponential rate of growth before Ibn Isḥāq as it did between Ibn Isḥāq and Wāqidī, we soon arrive at a stage at which not a single one remains," Crone aptly puts it.[25] More work should thus be done before one takes al-Wāqidī's testimony at face value. It is convenient now to have recourse to the sources themselves to demystify the obscurity that shrouds the early expeditions.

While ʿUbayda b. al-Ḥārith is reported by some to have been the commander of the first expedition to be dispatched by the Prophet,[26] there is another recension that allots the same "virtue" to Ḥamza.[27] Widely attested in the canonical ʿAbbāsid *sīra*s, both versions are contested by a rival account that credited ʿAbd Allāh b. Jaḥsh, the confederate of the Umayyads (*ḥalīf banī Umayya*), as the leader of the first *sariyya* and the first on whom the appellation *amīr al-muʾminīn* was bestowed.[28] The *awāʾil* (firsts) genre counts among the most ancient literary forms in Islamic historiography and was of great appeal for the early tradents. Their answers to the question of "who was the first" must, nevertheless, be treated with due circumspection given the glorifying incentives that tainted, at times, the sincerity of their attempts.[29] It is not hard to envisage, too, that we have been left with a plethora

**23** Landau-Tasseron 1995, 306.

**24** Whenever extant, Mūsā b. ʿUqba's reports are gleaned from the later sources and cited throughout this essay. Our other important early source, Maʿmar b. Rāshid, is mostly silent on the first expeditions, except for the Battle of Badr and the raid of Nakhla. In these cases, Maʿmar's reports are likewise adduced in this article.

**25** Crone 1987, 165. Crone asserts so in support of her main agenda that the Quraysh could not have engaged in incense trade prior to and at the time of the rise of Islam. This theory has duly been challenged by the subsequent scholarship – see, for example, Bukharin 2010, 115–134 – and even Crone herself acknowledged its shortcomings in her later work, Crone 2007, 63–88. Be that as it may, Crone's afore-quoted sentence about the unusual growth of caravan raids in al-Wāqidī's *maghāzī* can be assessed, and is actually sound, on its own right.

**26** This is what Ibn Isḥāq records, see Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 591; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (1967), II, 405.

**27** Al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989) I, 9. See Mūsā b. ʿUqba's account in al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil* (1985), III, 8; Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *ʿUyūn al-Athar* (1993), I, 260.

**28** Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 86; ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *al-Muṣannaf* (1972), XI, 49. See all three versions and the controversies surrounding their authenticity in Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Istīʿāb* (1992), I, 43; Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *ʿUyūn al-Athar* (1993), I, 260.

**29** Noth/Conrad 1994, 104–108. Juynboll 1983, 10–23, however, is sanguine about the *awāʾil* materials.

of rival traditions in the *awā'il* material due to various politico-sectarian factions bolstering their own claims.

As for the contradiction surrounding the commandership of the first *sariyya*, there is likely a case of the ʿAbbāsid-Umayyad feud at work. ʿAbd Allāh b. Jaḥsh's *ḥilf* with the Umayyads is enunciated in the reports introducing him as the protagonist of the first *sariyya*, and this can be taken as an undisguised endeavor by the Umayyads to burnish their own image. That al-Shaʿbī, the fervent partisan of the Umayyads,[30] appears among the advocators of this version testifies further to its pro-Umayyad nature.[31] With the ʿAbbāsids' accession to the caliphate, the Umayyad claim was nullified by disseminating the stories in which the members of the Banū Hāshim, the ʿAbbāsids' fellow tribesmen, are alleged as having commanded Islam's first expedition. The later ʿAbbāsid recensions are therefore in danger of having been largely fabricated (or perhaps distorted) by, or with the consent of, the ʿAbbāsid caliphate.[32] The other point to notice is a degree of exaggeration discernible in the accounts of the first *sariyya*s. The image of these expeditions' participants, as conveyed by the sources, is that of intrepid warriors who are utterly heedless of their enemies' numerical preponderance. A contingent of only 30 Muslims in the *sariyya* of Ḥamza is said by Ibn Isḥāq to have met (*laqiya*) a Qurashī group consisting of no less than 300 Meccans.[33] Al-Wāqidī proceeds to identify the Meccans as the members of a trade caravan and to aver that the parties "lined up for battle," but the polytheists, impressed by the Muslims' valor, accept the verdict of Majdī b. ʿAmr, the confederate of both factions, and no fighting occurs. Ḥamza allegedly eulogizes his comrades' spiritual supremacy, saying, "We were thirty riders, while they were two hundred and one."[34] The Muslim group under ʿUbayda b. al-Ḥārith, comprised of 60 or 80 riders, is said likewise to have encountered "a large number of Quraysh" (*jamʿan aẓīman min Quraysh*),[35] but once more this throng of Qurashīs prefers to withdraw, with the only noteworthy event being Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ' shooting the

**30** See Judd 2014, 41–51.

**31** Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Istīʿāb* (1992), III, 878; Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ, *Taʾrīkh* (1995), 24.

**32** We shall see that aside from the political motivations, the tribal and family interests redounded markedly to the formation of the account of the *sariyya* of ʿUbayda in which Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ allegedly exhibited his extraordinary skill of shooting. If not entirely fabricated, this expedition (and many of the other early *sariyya*s) may have in reality been some insignificant (perhaps scouting) missions that the later politico-tribal modifications raised to the level of prominent events.

**33** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 595. The number of the Meccans in al-Wāqidī and Mūsā b. ʿUqba's works are 300 and 130, respectively, al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 9; al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil* (1985), III, 9.

**34** Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (1954), 284.

**35** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 591; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (1967), II, 404.

*first* arrow for Islam.[36] This idealized portrayal of the Muslims' morale, as we shall see below, is sorely at odds with the deep reluctance shown by a sizable number of the Companions to face the risk of confronting the potent Quraysh. Beyond mere literary ornamentation, the tradition's emphasis on the heroic deeds of the Muslims in general, and on the glorious feats of such renowned individuals as Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ in particular, betrays apologetic efforts to justify the Companions who, for different reasons, eschewed the provocation of Meccans during the first months of Muḥammad's Medinan decade, most particularly at Badr. A detailed discussion on the Battle of Badr is in order; I shall deal now with the expeditions having Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ as their central actor.

Apart from extolling ʿUbayda b. al-Ḥārith by recognizing him as Islam's first military commander, the expedition of al-Rābigh contains little beyond recounting Saʿd's extraordinary skill of shooting, a ubiquitous theme that is in no way characteristic of this *sariyya* and recurs indiscriminately in the accounts of the Battles of Badr, Uḥud, al-Ṭāʾif, and in certain anecdotes of undetermined contexts.[37] Of 20 arrows Saʿd had in his quiver in the al-Rābigh expedition, we read, none missed and "they all injured either a man or an animal."[38] Elsewhere his arrow is reported as hitting a certain Ḥibbān who "had disquieted the Muslims": "[Saʿd's] arrow fell in the gap of the chest of Ḥibbān and he fell down, exposing his buttocks," we are told.[39] In the raid of al-Ṭāʾif, a man standing on a fortress inveighs against the Muslims and infuriates the Prophet. Saʿd then aims at him, and his arrow strikes the man's vein.[40] Thus a significant part of the expedition of al-Rābigh's account is the omnipresent *topos* of Saʿd's marvelous skill of shooting, intended to magnify his merits. There is also a passing mention in this story of al-Miqdād b. ʿAmr and ʿUtba b. Ghazwān fleeing from the Meccans and joining to "whom they really belonged."[41] While the claim of a Meccan Muslim escaping to the camp of his Medinan counterparts may not be baseless in its entirety, that al-Miqdād and ʿUtba would have done so strikes me as apocryphal. This is not only due to the fact that al-Miqdād is Saʿd's tribesman from Banū Zuhra[42] who might have likewise been aggrandized by the

**36** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 591; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 10; Juynboll 2007, 247.

**37** See Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt* (1990), III, 103–104; Ibn ʿAsākir, *Taʾrīkh Madīnat Dimashq* (1415 AH), XX, 280–372; and al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (1981), IV, 212; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* (1969), I, 181.

**38** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), I, 7.

**39** *Ibid*., 119. See also Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, VII, 125; al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿjam al-Kabīr* (1404 AH), I, 143.

**40** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), III, 929–930.

**41** Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (1954), 281.

**42** Though by confederation.

Zuhrī traditionists,[43] but because the juxtaposition by the *sīra* of these names is itself a literary commonplace. We hear of these three individuals as the main actors of the raid of Nakhla[44] and of ʿUtba accompanying Saʿd in the accounts of the great Conquests.[45] The former was in fact the latter's agent during the time of ʿUmar,[46] and that the tradition tends repeatedly to remember Saʿd and ʿUtba alongside each other during Muḥammad's lifetime might be anachronistic.[47]

Delving deeper into our Saʿd-related material, one more repetitive literary motif presents itself: namely, Saʿd's burning enthusiasm for vanquishing the Quraysh. Following the Meccans' alleged flight in the expedition to al-Rābigh, narrates al-Wāqidī, Saʿd asks ʿUbayda to chase the polytheists, noting that the Muslims can "overpower them," as "they have turned away in fear." Much to Saʿd's chagrin, however, ʿUbayda's answer is negative.[48] One discerns the same zeal on Saʿd's part in al-Wāqidī's account of the expedition to al-Kharrār, when a looting contingent under Sa'd arrives at al-Kharrār but finds out that the caravan has been missed.[49] Saʿd dolefully returns, the story continues, for he made a pledge to the Prophet not to go beyond al-Kharrār. The account concludes by pointing out that were it not for his promise, Saʿd would definitely have followed the Meccans.[50] The message we are expected to receive is a vivid one – that Saʿd is an ardent believer who bears a bitter animosity toward the Quraysh, but, regrettably, fails for one reason or another to quench his hatred against the pagan foe. This idealistic picture shatters in light of the evidence to the contrary. Beneath the façade of the laudable tribal tradition of Banū Zuhra lie problematic realities concerning Saʿd, of which, for all his progenies' apologetic endeavors, a remnant has yet remained in the sources. Of particular note in this regard is the story of the expedition of Biʾr Maʿūna, in which a Muslim party is reported to have been massacred by the Banū Sulaym. The *sīra* insists on repudiating altogether the participation in this *sariyya* of the *muhājirūn*, particularly Saʿd, stating simply that certain members of the *sariyya* did not accompany their fellow Muslims into battle and spared their own lives, as they "were with the camels at pasture."[51] The *tafsīr*'s less tendentious and more informative

**43** On their part in the transmission of this account, see Ibn ʿAsākir, *Taʾrīkh Madīnat Dimashq* (1415 AH), XX, 319.

**44** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 15–19; Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt* (1990), II, 7.

**45** al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (1967), IV, 72; Ibn al-Faqīḥ, *al-Buldān* (1996), 229; al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-Buldān* (1988), 341.

**46** Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt* (1990), VII, 5.

**47** See, for example, Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Istīʿāb* (1992), III, 1028; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (1967), III, 592.

**48** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), I, 7.

**49** The *sariyya* is not in the form of the caravan raid in the account of Ibn Isḥāq.

**50** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 11.

**51** Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (1954), 434; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 347.

account includes Saʿd among those who "lost their camel" (*aḍalla baʿīran lahum*) and "lagged behind" the main group.[52] As Kister has persuasively demonstrated, the statement "lagging behind" in this framework must be understood as a euphemism for "fleeing." "Later collections of the *maghāzī* preferred not to mention the version claiming that Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ, the first who shed blood for the cause of Islam, the hero of al-Qādisiyya, did not take part in the battle of Biʾr Maʿūna but saved his own life, while the other Companions died the death of martyrs," Kister judiciously puts it.[53] By a stroke of ill fortune, Saʿd fails to assist his fellow-riders in another incident, the Nakhla raid, where he and ʿUtba b. Ghazwān are said to have "left behind" the main party and "lost their camel" (*aḍalla baʿīran lahumā*).[54] What we have to do here is a literary *topos* that we may designate "Saʿd's lost camel," with its underlying motive being glossing over Saʿd's unwillingness to fight the enemies, particularly the Quraysh. Unlike the "family account" of the *sīra* that has been promulgated by Saʿd's offspring,[55] a less biased recension found in some *ḥadīth* and *tafsīr* compendia has it that when ʿAbd Allāh b. Jaḥsh and his companions reach Nakhla, two unspecified men (*rajulān*) – of whose identity we are understandably told nothing – return and prefer not to fight with the others.[56] We have then before us two categories of mutually exclusive evidence regarding Saʿd: those portraying him as a pugnacious warrior who eagerly yearns to combat the Quraysh and those denoting his great reluctance to do so. One can hardly deny that the romanticized anecdotes relayed by Saʿd's "energetic" descendants lay little, if any, claim to historicity.[57] Our current situation may be summarized as follows: To restore Saʿd's besmirched reputation, his descendants assign a series of courageous exploits to him in the world of literature to whitewash his cowardly or cautious acts in real life, with the result being the transformation of his character from a passive actor in the Nakhla and Biʾr Maʿūna expeditions to a valiant fighter in the *sariyya*s to

**52** See the exegetical comments on Q 5:11 in Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr* (1423 AH), I, 458; al-Ṭabarānī, *Tafsīr*, II, 367.

**53** Kister 1965a, 357.

**54** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 602; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 17.

**55** *Ibid*., 16.

**56** al-Nasāʾī, *al-Sunan al-Kubrā* (1991), V, 249; al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿjam al-Kabīr* (1404 AH), II, 163; ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *al-Tafsīr* (1411 AH), I, 102; al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr* (1416 AH), I, 143.

**57** That Saʿd's offspring performed an active part in glorifying the merits of their forefather and in hiding his faults is truly recognizable in a report attributed to Saʿd's grandson in which he is quoted as saying: "My father (viz. Saʿd's son) taught us the *Maghāzī* of the Messenger of God and enumerated for us his *ghazwa*s and *sariyya*s, and said, 'O my son, this is the glory of your father (*hādhihi sharafu ābā'ikum*) so do not leave behind its remembrance,'" al-Ṣāliḥī al-Shāmī, *Subul al-Hudā wa al-Rashād* (1993), IV, 10. See in this respect, too, Watt 1956, 7. On the significance of an "energetic descendant" for "promoting the reputation of an ancestor," see Cook 2015, 42.

al-Rābigh and al-Kharrār. But why, one may reasonably ask, did Saʿd so repeatedly "lose his camel," or, put differently, why did he so firmly abstain from confronting enemies, the Quraysh in particular? While it may well be that he simply desired to save his own life, as Kister suggests, subtler motivations might also have been at work. Helpful insights may be gleaned from an episode of the Badr story. Saʿd's fellow-tribesman, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAwf, is reported as having captured the Qurashī nobleman Umayya b. Khalaf in the battle, and as having attempted, although ultimately in vain, to defend Umayya against the Muslims who were determined to cut him into pieces.[58] That Umayya was ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's "friend during *jāhiliyya*"[59] may provide us with some justification as to the latter's act, but ʿAbd al-Raḥmān jeopardizing his life to guard Umayya may owe more to the fact that he was in charge of protecting ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's wealth in Mecca following the latter's immigration.[60] Naturally, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (and anybody else, in fact) could not have transferred his wealth lock, stock, and barrel from Mecca to Medina. This mutual financial interest between these Qurashī elites gives us an important clue as to why ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was so gravely concerned about Umayya's destiny and refrained from starting a feud with the Quraysh by killing a Meccan chieftain. It may be surmised (though admittedly on an *a priori* basis) that the socioeconomic ties with the Quraysh would likewise have redounded to Saʿd's nonbelligerent position toward the Meccans.[61]

We are now in a position to revisit the expeditions casting Saʿd in the role of the protagonist. Motivated by apologetic incentives, these events' narratives have been adorned by "virtue" material to bolster the notion of Saʿd's fierceness against the Meccans. It is precisely on this ground that the al-Kharrār expedition is altered from a demonstrably insignificant happening in the account of Ibn Isḥāq to a caravan raid in the "family account" of al-Wāqidī.[62] This change gives Saʿd the opportunity to rue the failure of seizing the Quraysh's caravan, paving the way thereby for the articulation of Saʿd's anti-Quraysh sentiments. Being of a truly literary nature, the caravan looting serves here as an essential element for propelling the apologetic tale of Saʿd's offspring. The motif of caravan raid is of a similar suspi-

**58** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 632; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 83; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (1967), II, 452.

**59** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 82.

**60** See Ibrahim 1990, 88. Having been among the most notable Meccan traders, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān reportedly acquired his wealth through trading in olive, oil, and leather, Anthony 2020, 79.

**61** Note that in the raid of Nakhla the Muslims were directly fighting with the Meccans, and in the Biʾr Maʿūna expedition Mecca was behind the attack on the Muslims, Kister 1965a, 356.

**62** On the questionable alteration of the mission to a caravan raid in al-Wāqidī's report, see Crone 1987, 224.

cious value in al-Wāqidī's story of the al-Rābigh raid,[63] not merely because it is the framework within which the Saʿd-vindicating episode (viz., his sorrow at the flight of the Meccan caravan) is situated, but also due to the presence of a rival account, preserved by Ibn ʿAsākir, mentioning the expedition as having been of a defensive/scouting character. According to this report, Muḥammad gets wind of the departure of the polytheists' troop (*jaysh al-mushrikīn*) from Mecca and their passing by Medina's vicinity. This prompted the Prophet to dispatch a mission under ʿUbayda, which returned after a brief skirmish.[64]

Having perused the narratives of the first *sariyya*s,[65] we shall now turn to the accounts of the earliest *ghazwa*s, to wit, the expeditions in which the Prophet himself is said to have participated. As was the case with the *sariyya*s, one perceives a clear dichotomy between al-Wāqidī's accounts and those of his predecessors with respect to the aim pursued in the earliest *ghazwa*s. The disparity reaches its pinnacle in the story of the Dhū l-ʿUshayra expedition, where one even wonders whether the incident narrated by al-Wāqidī and Ibn Isḥāq are in fact one and the same. As regards the al-Abwāʾ/Waddān *ghazwa*, Ibn Isḥāq narrates that Muḥammad goes to al-Abwāʾ, "making for Quraysh and Banū Ḍamra," but we are not given further hints as to what the obscure statement "making for Quraysh" (*yurīdu Quraysh*) could actually mean. Concerning the Ḍamra, however, we do know that Muḥammad made a peace treaty in this expedition with Makhshī b. ʿAmr, the tribe's chief.[66] On the whole, the impetus behind the *ghazwa* does not appear to be anything beyond signing an agreement between the Ḍamra, and this seems to be intimated by Ibn Hishām, whose account of the expedition is presented under the rubric of "the agreement with the Banī Ḍamra" (*muwādiʿat banī Ḍamra*). The event is even of lesser prominence in the account ascribed to Mūsā b. ʿUqba, who simply notes that Muḥammad stayed in Medina for 12 months following his arrival from Mecca until his first *ghazwa*, in which he reached al-Abwāʾ (*balagha al-Abwā*ʾ).[67] Like the expeditions headed by Ḥamza, ʿUbayda, and Saʿd, al-Wāqidī's story of al-Abwāʾ offers a rather curious, not to say doubtful addition, depicting the *ghazwa* as an attack on a Meccan caravan.[68] The same situation recurs in the Buwāṭ *ghazwa*, where, accord-

**63** Note again that neither Ibn Isḥāq nor Mūsā b. ʿUqba speaks whatsoever of the caravan raid, Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 591; al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil* (1985), III, 8–9.

**64** Ibn ʿAsākir, *Taʾrīkh Madīnat Dimashq* (1415 AH), LX, 157. I do not contend that this account could be accepted *in toto* (as it contains such apocryphal elements as Saʿd's shooting episode), but that the general context it conveys of the *sariyya* and its circumstantial details sounds more tenable.

**65** There remains only the expedition of Nakhla, to which I shall return at the end of this section.

**66** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971); al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (1967), II, 403.

**67** al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil* (1985), IX, 3.

**68** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 11–12.

ing to Ibn Isḥāq's succinct report, the Prophet is said to have left Medina "making for Quraysh" (*yurīdu Quraysh*), while al-Wāqidī introduces the motif of caravan looting into his narrative.[69] Ibn Isḥāq opens his account of the Dhū l-ʿUshayra expedition by stating: "Then he (Muḥammad) raided the Quraysh" (*thumma ghazā Quraysh*)," but as the report unfolds, it becomes apparent that we have no "raid" as such.[70] Ibn Isḥāq subsequently relates with an artificial fastidiousness a wealth of almost certainly spurious minutiae about the expedition, including Muḥammad's halting under a tree *en route*, the Muslims' praying and eating there, and Muḥammad's once drinking from a water-place, and then from a well. Ibn Isḥāq concludes his report mentioning the Prophet making a "treaty of friendship" with the Banū Mudlij.[71] This *ghazwa*, as delineated in al-Wāqidī's record (which is here abnormally briefer than that of Ibn Isḥāq), is nothing but intercepting a Meccan caravan, and the friendship pact with the Banū Mudlij is eccentrically passed over in silence.[72]

Let us recapitulate the results: Of the six caravan lootings launched, according to al-Wāqidī, in the *ghazwa*s and *sariyya*s during the first 16 months after the hijra, there is not a word in Mūsā b. ʿUqba and Ibn Isḥāq's reports. The previous scholarship tended at times to explain away this metamorphosis of the first expeditions into caravan raids in al-Wāqidī's *maghāzī*, taking for granted that he simply presents information that is kept from us by the earliest sources. This sounds too naïve a supposition, however. As for the *sariyya*s giving Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ the leading role, we have seen that the alteration of the missions to caravan raids was a literary device that was deployed to apologetic ends. The representation as caravan lootings of the remaining expeditions, viz., the *ghazwa*s as well as the *awāʾil*–type *sariyya* purportedly commanded by Ḥamza, may have its roots in al-Wāqidī's wider editorial policies (and those of the ʿAbbāsid state) to present an exaggerated portrayal of the strength of the Muslim (proto-)state in the first month of its establishment. The tradition's insistence that the Muslims "took the offensive"[73] against the Quraysh through intercepting Meccan caravans stands in stark contrast with the disinclination shown by certain *muhājirūn* to arouse the Quraysh's enmity (chiefly at Badr, but also before it), a fact pointing to the plausible conclusion that the proliferation of the caravan raids in al-Wāqidī's *maghāzī*, which represents the

**69** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 598; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (1967), II, 405; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 12.

**70** On the meanings of the word *ghazwa* in the Prophet's biography, see Jones 1957, 246; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), I, xiv (Faizer and Rippin's introduction on *al-Maghāzī*'s translation).

**71** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 598–599; Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (1954), 285.

**72** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 12–13.

**73** Watt 1956, 2.

advanced stages of the compilation of the "orthodox" biography of the Prophet, may be apologetically motivated. These attempts to vindicate the *muhājirūn* may offer some clues as to why the *sīra* so boldly enunciates that "the Messenger of God did not send anyone from the Anṣār until he himself raided at Badr."[74] Regarding the nature of the first Medinan expeditions, we are then reduced to our earliest sources, which speak of Muḥammad "making for Quraysh." If anything, the vague statement *yurīdu/ghazā Quraysh* might denote defensive and/or surveillance measures of the kind of which the foregoing Ibn ʿAsākir tradition makes reference. What argues in favor of the archaic status of this account is its concordance with the context. Unlike al-Wāqidī's idealized depiction of the Muslims as fearless warriors who repeatedly menace the powerful Quraysh's trade, Ibn ʿAsākir's account connotes the Muslims' being a fledgling and fragile community who are apprehensive of losing their very existence. Worth recalling here is the tumultuous circumstances within the borders of Medina itself, a place that by no means came unanimously under Muḥammad's sway for "at least five of his ten years of activity."[75] It is conceivable that Muḥammad, while establishing only a precarious foothold in his own base, Medina, would not have placed himself and his adherents out on a limb by threatening the Meccan trade. The ninth-century historiography inclined, however, to remember the Medinan state strong from the outset. It is against this backdrop that the "exponential" growth of the caravan raids in al-Wāqidī's *maghāzī* could be explicated.

It remains to discuss the only expedition in which the attack on a caravan sounds more likely to have occurred, the *sariyya* of Nakhla. Led by ʿAbd Allāh b. Jaḥsh, the expedition is well-known in the tradition for the notoriety its participants attained.[76] According to Ibn Isḥāq, Muḥammad orders ʿAbd Allāh that: "Lie in wait there (i. e., at Nakhla) for Quraysh and find out for us what they are doing" (*fa-taraṣṣad bi-hā Qurayshan wa taʿallam la-nā min akhbārihim*).[77] Mūsā b. ʿUqba's more reticent account narrates the Prophet's command to Ibn Jaḥsh as follows: "Depart until you reach Nakhla."[78] The similar propensity of transforming the expedition to a caravan raid is perceptible in al-Wāqidī's reports in which the *sariyya*'s participants are alleged as being entrusted to "observe the caravan of the

**74** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), I, 7. On the implausibility of this claim, see Watt 1956, 3. Also note the rival account recorded (though rejected as unsound) by al-Wāqidī himself naming certain Anṣārīs as participating in the expedition of Ḥamza, al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 9.

**75** Lecker 1995a, 20.

**76** Ibrahim 1990, 90.

**77** Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (1954), 287; Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 602.

**78** Ibn Shabba, *Taʾrīkh al-Madīna* (1410 AH), II, 473.

Quraysh" (*fa-taraṣṣad bi-hā ʿīru Quraysh*).[79] The initial purpose of the expedition aside, the sources tend to agree that the Muslim riders indeed met a Meccan caravan at Nakhla. Having vacillated at first on whether to assault the caravan (reportedly because of the prohibition against war in the sacred months), they finally raided the Qurashīs and drove their caravan to Medina.[80] The claim of the earliest sources (Ibn Isḥāq, in particular) that the Muslims disobeyed the Prophet by attacking the caravan, and that they were initially commissioned only for reconnaissance (apologetic though it may appear), tallies with what is argued above about the vulnerability of Medina against foreign aggression and about the patrolling character of the first expeditions as a whole.[81]

To sum up, amongst the expeditions conducted by the Muslims before the Battle of Badr, only one (viz., the *sariyya* of Nakhla) may be identified as a caravan looting. And this single incursion (which sounds spontaneous indeed) does not show a policy on Muḥammad's part to disrupt the Quraysh's commerce in this period, nor was he in fact able to do so, unlike the "orthodox" image the later Islamic historiography strives to convey.

## The Battle of Badr

The most famous, though finally abortive, attempt of the Prophet to capture a Qurashī caravan became, so the *sīra* declares, the *casus belli* for the historic Battle

**79** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 14.

**80** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 602–603; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 14–16. See also Maʿmar b. Rāshid's account in ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *al-Tafsīr* (1411 AH), I, 101; Maʿmar b. Rāshid, *al-Maghāzī* (2014), 296.

**81** It is worth noting that apart from the expeditions discussed thus far, one further *sariyya*, namely Badr al-Ūla, is said in Ibn Abī Shayba's report to have been a caravan raid, Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaf* (1409 AH), VIII, 467. See also Landau-Tasseron 1995, 320, who adduces this report while stating that al-Wāqidī "gives a completely different account of Badr al-Ūla" in which the *sariyya* is not directed against a caravan. It should be added that in Ibn Isḥāq's reports there is not a mention of the caravan raid, too. Tellingly, Ibn Abī Shayba's report is narrated in other *ḥadīth* compendia but *not* under the rubric of the Badr al-Ūla expedition; see, for instance, Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* (1969), I, 178. Moreover, a comparison of the *dramatis personae* and the narrative motifs of Ibn Abī Shayba's account with those of the story of the Nakhla raid would leave no room for doubt that Ibn Abī Shayba's account of Badr al-Ūla is a modified version of the story of Nakhla. Both expeditions are sent in the month of Rajab, the participants of both *sariyya*s are censured by people for violating the sacred month, the Prophet rebukes the Muslim riders on both occasions, and there is a mention of *al-fay'* in both stories. Ibn Abī Shayba's recension of the Badr al-Ūla expedition is, then, a variant of the story of the Nakhla raid to which the author gave the wrong title.

of Badr, the Muslims' first major triumph over their Meccan adversary, and an event taken both in the scripture and the tradition as the vivid manifestation of divine intervention in favor of the Muslims.[82] Having heard about an "inbound" caravan approaching from Syria, Muḥammad and his Companions set forth to seize it. The caravan is led by Abū Sufyān who, after receiving the news of the looming hazard, deviates from the main route and meanwhile sends a delegate to his fellow Meccans, exhorting them to dispatch a rescue force. Abū Sufyān manages eventually to save the caravan, whereupon informing the Quraysh that the need for the relief force has been obviated. The Meccans, however, "hoping to get rid of Muḥammad once for all"[83] proceed to Badr and a fierce battle ensues.[84] Such is the story as it appears in the traditional biography of the Prophet, but, as scarcely as it is noticed in the modern literature,[85] the Muslims' onslaught on a caravan before the Battle of Badr is no less dubious than the purported raids in the previous expeditions. Knowing that the theme of caravan raid is prone to be a literary *topos*, it is beneficial to examine what tendencies might lie behind its utilization in the story of Badr.

When Muḥammad summons his entourages to the incursion on the caravan, we read, they answered his command, "some eagerly, others reluctantly, because they had not thought that the apostle would go to war."[86] Elsewhere we are told that many of Muḥammad's Companions (*basharun kathīr min aṣḥābihi*) forbore to participate in the raid, "hated his going," and "there were many words of dispute." The tradition reassures us, however, that "those who stayed behind were not censured (*lam yulamm*) because a battle had not been intended."[87] Again it is convenient to listen to the message that the *sīra* wants us to grasp: While the Battle of Badr proved to be one of the most decisive encounters between the Muslims and the Quraysh, and despite the fact that Islam was on the verge of being entirely eradicated,[88] those who were absent at Badr ought not to be reprimanded, for the Prophet "had set out

**82** Athamina 2011; Hawting 2015, 75.

**83** Watt 1956, 11.

**84** On the account of the battle, see, for example, Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 606–716; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (1967), II, 421–478; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 19–128; Maʿmar b. Rāshid, *al-Maghāzī* (2014), 50–58.

**85** Hawting 2015 marks a noteworthy exception.

**86** Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (1954), 289.

**87** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), I, 12. See the same point referred to in ʿUrwa's letter to ʿAbd al-Malik: "They (the Companions) set out only intending to go after Abū Sufyān and the riders that accompanied him. Seeing it as nothing more than a chance to plunder, they did not imagine that there might be a full-fledged battle when they met them," Anthony 2020, 116.

**88** This may be elicited from the saying attributed to the Prophet: "O God, if this band perish today Thou wilt be worshipped no more," Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (1954), 300; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* (1969), I, 30; Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaf* (1409 AH), VII, 95.

for the caravan."[89] Al-Wāqidī's account attempts further to exonerate the so-called *mutakhallifūn* ("those who stayed behind"), highlighting firmly, and somewhat obsessively, that they "were from families of resolve and discernment" (*ahl niyyāt wa baṣā'ir*); had "they thought that it would be a battle, they would not have stayed behind."[90] That now and again we are reminded by the tradition of the alleged sincerity of the *mutakhallifūn* may be symptomatic that a dogmatic notion is at play. Usayd b. Ḥuḍayr, the renowned member of ʿAbd al-Ashhal (of Aws), and a prominent figure amongst the *mutakhallifūn*, is reported to have visited the Prophet upon his return from Badr, asking Muḥammad to condone him, saying, "I did not think that you will meet the enemy. I thought that it was only for the caravan."[91] The same words have been put into the mouth of Saʿd b. Muʿādh, who tells the Prophet in the middle of the battle that in case of the Muslims suffering defeat, Muḥammad can mount his camel and return to those "who are left behind." He soothes the Prophet that the *mutakhallifūn* are just as deeply attached to Muḥammad as the participants of the battle are. Saʿd further stresses that "had they thought that you would be fighting, they would not have stayed behind."[92] I deliberately quoted the sources extensively in order to convey to the reader the full dimensions of the tradition's apologetic efforts and the pains it takes to acquit the *mutakhallifūn*.

Let us turn now to the Qurʾānic narrative of the battle. Remarkably, the *sīra*'s story exhibits patent discrepancies with the verses of sura 8, which are traditionally assumed to have been revealed in connection with the Battle of Badr. In his important article, Hawting demonstrates very well that the exegetes had overt difficulties in their attempt to establish a link between the *sīra*'s account and the Qurʾānic verses, and their work "involves a certain arbitrariness." Of particular concern for us is Hawting's observation that the word *rakb* (riders) in Q 8:42[93] is rather inconsistently interpreted as referring to the Quraysh's caravan. Hawting persuasively argues that besides the *rakb* being truly idiosyncratic *vis-à-vis* the far more common word *ʿīr* (which the Qurʾān itself utilizes three times elsewhere), there is no indication in the *sīra* that the caravan was in the vicinity of the Meccan troops at Badr. On the contrary, the caravan is said to have successfully escaped

**89** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), I, 12. See also al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il* (1985), III, 106; Maʿmar b. Rāshid, *al-Maghāzī* (2014), 50.

**90** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), I, 12.

**91** *Ibid.*

**92** Ibn Isḥāq, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (1954), 297. See also al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 49.

**93** "Remember ye were on the hither side of the valley, and they on the farther side, and the *rakb* on lower ground than ye." All the Qurʾānic translations in this essay are by Yūsuf Alī.

the Muslim riders.[94] There is more to the incongruity between the *sīra* and the Qurʾān. Q 8:5–6 is revealing in this respect and worth quoting here: "Just as thy Lord ordered thee out of thy house in truth, even though a party among the Believers disliked it, disputing with thee concerning the truth after it was made manifest, as if they were being driven to death while they see it." These verses are the chastisement of the believers for their detesting the fighting with the enemy. The Muslims are said here to have been aware *from the outset*, when the Prophet left Medina (lit. his "house" (*bayt*)), that a military confrontation is due to be met and thus sought ways to avoid it.[95] The *sīra* likewise refers to the unwillingness of the Muslims to join the Prophet, but not on account of their fear of fighting, rather, for their lack of interest in gaining booty (!).[96] Put another way, the Muslims were disinclined to participate in the battle, according to the Qurʾān, as they believed there would be imminent fighting, but according to the *sīra* they were unwilling to join Muḥammad as they supposed there would be no fighting. While the Qurʾān expressly admonishes the *mutakhallifūn*, the *sīra* absolves them from the blame, labeling them the people "of resolve and discernment." There can be little doubt that the eighth- and ninth-century account of the *sīra* diverges from our contemporary source, the Qurʾān, in order to gloss over the culpability of the *mutakhallifūn*.

**94** Hawting 2015, 83–84. Hawting contends that "at least some of the Qurʾānic material" assigned by the exegetes to the Badr story seems to be a reference to "the story of the Exodus and the passage of the Israelites through the sea." He also makes a survey of the previous scholarly opinions on the verses at the beginning of sura 8. According to him, Bell and Rubin appear to hold that the Qurʾān itself sees a correspondence between the Battle of Badr and the Exodus, while Donner sounds "more skeptical" that Q 8:41–42 alludes to the Battle of Badr. What speaks against the connection of these verses and the Badr story, says Hawting, is the fact that "the commentators seem to need considerable effort to establish links between the Qurʾānic text and the battle." My contention is that the association between certain verses at the opening section of sura 8 (e. g., Q 8:41 and surrounding verses, as Donner 2007, 289, proffers) with the Exodus is plausible, but there is no reason to go so far as to doubt that the whole cluster of verses, particularly Q 8:5–6 that has the Prophet as their addressee, is entirely unrelated to such a dramatic event in Muḥammad's life as the Battle of Badr. I will argue that what in Hawting's eyes casts doubt on such an association, viz., the commentators' difficulty "to establish links between the Qurʾānic text and the battle" stems (at least in part) from the *sīra*'s apologetic efforts to suppress the realities about those who "stayed behind" and did not participate in the battle.

**95** These verses do not explicitly refer to a battle, but there is a strong presumption that the Muslims' fear was from a military confrontation in which they saw themselves as "being driven to death." The other verses adduced below in connection with the Battle of Badr are nonetheless *fully explicit* that the anxiety of the Companions was due to the impending war with the Meccans.

**96** This certainly begs the question of why might they have been uninterested in the spoils of caravan looting?

And the integral element of this apologetic scenario is the motif of caravan raid that the *sīra* includes in its narrative.

It is worth remarking that the distaste of certain Companions to take part in the Battle of Badr, Islam's first dire predicament, engendered the crystallization of a gamut of apologies. As regards Kaʿb b. Mālik, for example, it is known through a "family account" that before the Tabūk expedition he partook in all the *ghazwa*s except the Battle of Badr, but his *takhallūf* was not a reprehensible deed, so the report claims, and the Prophet did not castigate anyone on this ground (*lam yuʿātib al-nabī aḥad*)[97] because he left Medina only for the caravan.[98] Ḥudhayfa and his father Abī Ḥusayl are said to have been captured by the Qurashīs, who only released them when they took an oath that they would not assist Muḥammad in the battle. Upon seeing the Prophet, they inquire of him whether they should accompany the Muslims, and he replies that they ought to keep their promise![99] The future caliph ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān stays behind, purportedly by the Prophet's order, to care for his sick wife, the Prophet's daughter, Ruqayya, who dies precisely when the news of the Muslims' victory reaches Medina.[100] Ṭalḥa b. ʿUbayd Allāh and Saʿīd b. Zayd were reportedly on a spying mission to locate the caravan, or, according to a rival account, were on a trade journey in Syria.[101] A handful of Companions, including the notorious Abū Lubāba, are supposed to have been appointed as Muḥammad's deputies in varying districts of Medina.[102] The famous Khazrajī chief, Saʿd b. ʿUbāda, is alleged to have gone "to the homes of the Anṣār and spurred them to go out to battle. However, he was bitten by something at that place and that prevented him from going out."[103] There are also fanciful tales about Khawwāt b. Jubayr, who missed the battle because he broke his leg;[104] about al-Hārith b. al-Ṣimma, who "stayed behind" at al-Rawḥāʾ;[105] about a companion who was left behind due to

**97** Note the sharp contrast between this claim and certain Muslims being castigated by the Qurʾān.
**98** Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* (1969), VI, 387; Maʿmar b. Rāshid, *al-Maghāzī* (2014), 130; al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr* (1416 AH), II, 93; Ibn ʿAsākir, *Taʾrīkh Madīnat Dimashq* (1415 AH), II, 31.
**99** Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* (1969), V, 395; Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Muṣannaf* (1409 AH), VII, 612; al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿjam al-Kabīr* (1404 AH), III, 164; Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd al-Ghāba* (1989), IV, 752. On this "apologetic report," see also Lecker 1993, 156.
**100** Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* (1969), I, 68; Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 642–643; Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt* (1990), VIII, 30.
**101** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 101; Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 682; Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt* (1990), II, 7; Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Istīʿāb* (1992), II, 765.
**102** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 101; Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Istīʿāb* (1992), IV, 1740.
**103** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), I, 51.
**104** Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Istīʿāb* (1992), II, 456; Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd al-Ghāba* (1989), I, 625; al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī, *al-Mustadrak*, III, 413.
**105** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), I, 51; Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 703.

his sickness;[106] and regarding Saʿd b. Mālik al-Sāʿidī, who dies, his offspring avers, when preparing for the battle.[107] This bevy of apologetic anecdotes demonstrably betrays the profound unease felt by the *mutakhallifūn* and their descendants.[108] Set in the wider context of justifying the *mutakhallifūn*, the episode of caravan looting in the story of Badr is, therefore, highly suspicious and can be jettisoned as fabricated.

Fortunately, some rival testimonies, rare as there are, divulge more clearly the apologetic function of the motif of caravan raid. The exegetical comments on Q 4:77 are striking in this regard. The verse reads: "Hast thou not turned thy vision to those who were told to hold back their hands (from fighting) but establish regular prayers and spend in charity? When (at length) the order for fighting was issued to them, behold! a section of them feared men as – or even more than – they should have feared Allāh. They said: 'Our Lord! Why hast Thou ordered us to fight? Wouldst Thou not grant us respite to our (natural) term, near (enough)?'" The commentators construed this verse as alluding to the circumstances surrounding the Battle of Badr, when for the first time war was issued to the believers.[109] This seems to be a quite plausible attribution, being in line with Q 8:5–6 that speaks likewise of "a party among the Believers [who] disliked" fighting. Several individuals are named in the commentaries of Q 4:77 as eschewing the war with the Quraysh; of note among them are ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAwf and Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ.[110] As mentioned above, both Companions are otherwise known as holding a passive, or probably pacifying, position toward the Quraysh, and it is hardly unexpected that they would have tried to avert war with the Quraysh at Badr. The person specifically identified as the one who stayed behind and "feared men as – or even more than – [he] should have feared Allāh" is none other than Ṭalḥa b. ʿUbayd Allāh,[111] otherwise claimed as having been absent at Badr due to his being commissioned to spy on the caravan. The incorporation of the motif of caravan looting into the Badr story

**106** Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd al-Ghāba* (1989), II, 390.

**107** Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt* (1990), III, 469; Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Istīʿāb* (1992), II, 602.

**108** Reputedly, amongst the major impetuses on Mūsā b. ʿUqba's part to compile his *Maghāzī* was to quell the "disputes over who had, and had not, actually participated in the Battle of Badr," Anthony 2020, 151. This is not to say, to be sure, that we should take Mūsā b. ʿUqba's list of the battle's participants literally, but it is quite certain that the issue of the participation (or lack thereof) in the Battle of Badr was a matter of great concern for the Companions' descendants.

**109** Al-Ṭabarānī, *Tafsīr*, II, 263; al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa al-Bayān* (1422 AH), III, 345.

**110** *Ibid.;* Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr* (1423 AH), I, 389; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān* (1412 AH), V, 108 ; al-Baghawī, *Tafsīr* (1420), I, 663.

**111** Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr* (1423 AH), I, 390.

is then a greatly efficacious means of *suppressio veri* and *suggestio falsi*.[112] It is this very motif that proves guiltless the *mutakhallifūn*, including those who stayed in Medina, like Usayd b. Ḥuḍayr, and those who were in a fictitious mission to scout the Meccan caravan, like Ṭalḥa and Saʿīd b. Zayd. That many of the *mutakhallifūn* were to rise to a great political stature (even to ascend the caliphate, in the case of ʿUthmān) has much to do with the distortion of the account of the Battle of Badr in favor of them.[113] The epitome of such whitewashing endeavors occurs in a version of the story that presents a wholly skewed portrayal of the war's outbreak and is in complete contradiction with the Qurʾān. After hearing the news of Abū Sufyān's caravan, according to this recension, Muḥammad announces to his entourage that he will set off to seize the caravan, stressing, however, that *only* those whose mounts are ready (*man kāna ẓahruhu ḥāḍiran*) will be allowed to take part in the looting. Some people ask permission from the Prophet to bring their mounts from Upper Medina, but Muḥammad insists that only those who are fully prepared are permitted to be members of the expedition.[114] Not only does no Companion abhor the fighting here (as the Qurʾān suggests they did), but they are greatly desirous to back the Prophet up in his ensuing raid, and it is Muḥammad himself that deprives them of participating in the battle. If anyone is to be held responsible for the absence of the *mutakhallifūn* at Badr, according to this version, it is Muḥammad and *not* the Companions.

What may we envisage, then, of the outburst of the war if the motif of plundering the caravan in the *sīra*'s story of Badr is a mere *topos*?[115] As is well known, there is no methodologically secure path from literary *topoi* to historical realities,[116] but here there seems to be room for reasonable *surmise*, in the light of some remote evidence outside the body of the *sīra*. Q 9:13 reminds the believers of the way in which the first battle with the Meccans began: "Will ye not fight people who violated their

**112** In addition to *rakb*, the phrase *ghayra dhāt al-shawka* ("the one unarmed") has been interpreted by commentators as referring to the Quraysh's caravan. Like the word *rakb*, the identification of *ghayra dhāt al-shawka* with the caravan is arbitrary and by no means self-evident. Considering its literal sense, *ghayra dhāt al-shawka* may be supposed as a mission of the kind mentioned in the Ibn ʿAsākir tradition, or in the Badr al-Mawʿid story, in which no (serious) fighting took place, al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 384–391.

**113** *Pace* Görke and Schoeler 2009, 294, the Islamic tradition (particularly ʿUrwa's material) cannot be used as a direct source for the Battle of Badr, one of the most famous events in the Prophet's life. See also Berg 2020, 95, who questions the "assumption that chronological proximity [of ʿUrwa to the Prophet's time] implies historicity."

**114** Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* (1969), III, 136; Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, VI, 44; al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil* (1985), III, 68.

**115** A more detailed discussion on the literary devices of the story of Badr is presented below.

**116** Noth/Conrad 1994, 114; Conrad 1992, 322; Pavlovitch 2017, 73.

oaths, plotted to expel the Messenger, and attacked you first?" The context of the verse pertains well to the first days of Muḥammad's Medinan career, for it mentions the expulsion (from Mecca) of the Messenger and his first war with the Meccans. As explicated by the commentators, the statement "attacked you first" (*badaʾukum awwalu marra*) corresponds to the Battle of Badr.[117] The point that is kept from us in the *sīra* is that it was the Quraysh who took the initiative against the Muslims at Badr. We have seen above that, unlike the picture conveyed by the Islamic historiography about the period before the Battle of Badr, Muḥammad's power was too limited to run the tremendous risk of the provocation of the Quraysh, as the crisis it would precipitate might well have been tantamount to the obliteration of his nascent community. It seems tenable, thanks to our foregoing analysis of the Badr incident, that he would not have likewise fomented war with the Quraysh at Badr. The dread and anxiety of certain Companions to fight with the Meccan troop was probably a matter of extreme discomfort in the time when the *sīra* was being collected and complied. That is probably why the *sīra* tends to recall the Muslims as the instigator of war at Badr and before it.

## The Parallels between the Battle of Badr and the Sinful Wars

Aside from the tendentiousness of the *sīra*'s narrative of Badr and its glaring inconsistencies with the more credible Qurʾānic verses attributed to the battle, what renders the *sīra*'s story all the more dubious is the strong parallels it exhibits with the accounts of the so-called sinful wars (*ḥurūb al-fijār*), a series of conflicts ranging from minor skirmishes to all-out wars waged in Arabia during the late sixth century. I am particularly concerned with the battles that reportedly took place following the seizure by al-Barrāḍ b. Qays al-Kinānī of al-Nuʿmān b. al-Mundhir's caravan.[118] As I will demonstrate, the narratives of *ḥurūb al-fijār* seem to have been a prominent source of borrowing (or inspiration) for early tradents to shape the *sīra*'s story of Badr. It is interesting to note that the details of this pre-Islamic event were of an obvious appeal for the first biographers of the Prophet. The cause of conflict between Muḥammad and the Jewish tribe of Banū Qaynuqāʿ, as found in the *sīra*, is the sexual harassment of a Muslim woman by the Jews, and this is the very episode that appears with analogous narrative motifs and similar diction in

**117** See, for instance, al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān* (1412 AH), X, 63 ; al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa al-Bayān* (1422 AH), V, 16.

**118** On the sinful wars, see Landau-Tasseron 1986, 37–59; Shahid 2009, 22–23, 54.

the story of the first *fijār*, or *fijār al-marʾa*.[119] It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the *sīra*'s account of Badr would have similarly been influenced by the tales of the sinful wars.

The *casus belli* both in the Battle of Badr and *ḥurūb al-fijār* is an attempt (abortive in the former case and successful in the latter) to seize a trade caravan. In the Badr story, Abū Sufyān escapes from the Muslims who try to intercept his caravan, and in the *fijār* wars (more accurately *fijār al-laṭīma*) al-Barrāḍ treacherously kills ʿUrwa al-Raḥḥal al-ʿĀmirī of Hawāzin (under whose aegis al-Nuʿmān's annual caravan is to travel to the ʿUkāẓ market), then appropriating his caravan. Both incidents escalate afterward into intense battles between those desirous to protect their trade and dignity[120] and those responsible for the attack on the commercial caravan.[121]

In both stories, the caravan is called *al-laṭīma*,[122] "the technical term for the camels of the caravan that started from Lakhmid Ḥīra."[123] Whereas *al-laṭīma* is a customary word for al-Nuʿmān's caravan in the *ḥurūb al-fijār* narratives, it is truly atypical in a report belonging to the Prophet's life. To the best of my knowledge, this word has been deployed almost exclusively in the traditions of *ayyām al-ʿArab* (Arab battle-days), with its quintessential example being the abovementioned episode in the sinful war named *fijār al-laṭīma* (or *fijār al-akbar*).[124] Nowhere does this term appear in the accounts of the Prophet's life except the Battle of Badr, being substituted by the far more familiar word *ʿīr*.[125] By and large, we seem to be on

**119** See Crone 1987, 145; Schöller 1998, 258.

**120** That is to say, the Quraysh in the case of the Battle of Badr, and the Hawāzin in the sinful wars.

**121** To wit, the Muslims in the case of the Battle of Badr and the Quraysh–Kināna alliance in the sinful wars.

**122** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 609; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 31–32; Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Munammaq* (1985), 165.

**123** Shahid 2009, 22–23; on *al-laṭīma*, see also Fraenkel 1886, 176–177; Ibrahim 1982, 350; King 2008, 183; King 2017, 154–155; Toral-Niehoff 2014, 52, 127.

**124** Abū al-Baqā, *al-Manāqib al-mazyadiyyah* (1984), 202.

**125** Outside the corpus of the *ayyām al-ʿArab* traditions, I was able to find only a single attestation of this word in the account of the *ridda* of the Banū Sulaym, al-Kalāʿī, *al-Iktifāʾ* (1420 AH), II, 147; Lecker 1989, 157, where a *laṭīma* sent by a Ghassānid king to the Prophet is said to have been robbed by a portion of Sulaym who "apostatized" after Muḥammad's death. The first thing to notice is that the alleged interception of this caravan by the Sulaym, among other things, is the justification in the tradition of "the extreme harshness which the *ridda* of the Sulaym encountered," Lecker 2005, 5. This makes the episode of the caravan raid of a very suspicious value. And even in this most likely fabricated tale the *laṭīma* is used, as in the *ayyām al-ʿArab* stories, with respect to the caravan of a king that here does not belong to a Lakhmid monarch but to his Ghassānid counterpart. It can be concluded that the word *laṭīma* has been deployed in the context of the *ridda* in a very dubious story that (like the story of Badr) betrays the contamination of the *ayyām al-ʿArab* material.

firm ground when reckoning the occurrence of the word *al-laṭīma* in the opening section of the Badr account as an early warning that the *sīra*'s story might have been contaminated by the *ayyām al-ʿArab* material.

After al-Barrāḍ takes the caravan, he hastily absconds toward Mecca, or according to another account, toward Khaybar, lest the members of the Hawāzin/Qays recapture the caravan and avenge ʿUrwa's savage murder.[126] This is reminiscent of Abū Sufyān's hurried flight toward Mecca in fear of the Muslims' incursion. On his way to Mecca, according to al-Aghānī's account, al-Barrāḍ offers a man from Asad b. Khuzayma a wage to go to his Qurashī confederate, Ḥarb b. Umayya (Abū Sufyān's father), cautioning him of the Qays' punitive measures.[127] Such, too, is the course of action made by Abū Sufyān who hires Ḍamḍam b. ʿAmr, whom he dispatches to Mecca to inform the Quraysh of the threat of the Muslims' impending attack on the caravan.[128]

A further striking parallel between our stories is a scouting group of two riders seeking to find the fleeing caravan. In search of al-Barrāḍ and the seized caravan, two men of Qays are reported to have visited al-Barrāḍ, of whom they inquire: "Did you notice a man named al-Barrāḍ?" (*hal aḥsasta rajulan yuqāl lahu al-Barrāḍ*). Al-Barrāḍ answers negatively and then deceitfully slays the Qaysī scouts.[129] Likewise, we hear in the Badr story of Ṭalḥa and Saʿīd b. Zayd being sent "to seek information about the caravan" (*yataḥassasān khabar al-ʿīr*).[130] The similarity of these two episodes in the accounts of *ḥurūb al-fijār* and Badr, and the former's being a likely source for the latter, would gain special prominence when one recalls how this concocted mission cleanses Ṭalḥa and Saʿīd b. Zayd from the charge of being absent at the battle without having a legitimate cause. Elsewhere the Prophet is reported to have sent, too, Basbas and ʿAdī b. Abī Zaghbāʾ to collect information (*yataḥassasān*) about the caravan, a task they could successfully accomplish in Majdī b. ʿAmr's territory.[131] Abū Sufyān himself is reported to have been distraught about being observed by Muḥammad's spies, asking Majdī, "O Majdī, did you see anyone?" (*hal aḥsasta aḥad*).[132] Embedded likewise in the accounts of Badr and

**126** Landau-Tasseron (1986), 46; Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī*, XXII, 309–312; Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 196; Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Munammaq* (1985), 166–167; Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi, *al-ʿIqd al-Farīd* (1940–1965), II, 299–300.

**127** Abū al-Faraj, *al-Aghānī*, XXII, 310.

**128** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 607; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 28.

**129** Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Munammaq* (1985), 167; Ibn ʿAbd Rabbihi, *al-ʿIqd* (1940–1965), II, 300.

**130** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), I, 11; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 19.

**131** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 614, 617; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 40; Maʿmar b. Rāshid, *al-Maghāzī* (2014), 50–52.

**132** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 618; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 41; Maʿmar b. Rāshid, *al-Maghāzī* (2014), 52.

*ḥurūb al-fijār*, the motif of "two scouts" is narrated with analogous wordings. This argues further in favor of the correspondence between these stories.

The next parallel pertains to the episode of the Quraysh organizing military recruits. To mobilize the troops at Badr, the Quraysh are said to have bought weapons (*ishtaraw silāḥan*) and those powerful among them helped their weak people (*aʿāna qawiyyuhum ḍaʿīfahum*). Several figures, including Suhayl b. ʿAmr, Zamaʿa b. al-Aswad, and Ṭuʿayma b. ʿAdī, are mentioned as having bestowed weapons and animals to the poor men, stirring them up to participate in the battle.[133] As for the sinful wars, the Quraysh's merchants are similarly reported to have armed the people (*sallaḥat Quraysh al-rijāl*) and distributed great wealth to recruit a military force. Certain opulent Meccans like ʿAbd Allāh b. Judʿān, Ḥarb b. Umayya, and Ḥishām b. al-Mughīra are specifically named as either arming their men with weapons or helping them with immense riches (*aʿāna bi-mālin ʿaẓīm*).[134] One further parallel in the context of the Quraysh's mobilizing its army deserves comment. Prior to their departure, some among the Quraysh allegedly "drew lots before Hubal for going out" (*istaqsamat Quraysh bi-l-azlām ʿinda Hubal li-l-khurūj*) and, it is reported, "drew out the forbidding arrowhead for going out."[135] Abū Jahl, on the contrary, is purported to have refused to do so, stressing the vital necessity of protecting their caravan. In a similar vein, the *istiqsām* motif is found in the narratives of the sinful wars, where al-Barrāḍ casts lots for killing ʿUrwa (*yastaqsimu fī qatli ʿUrwa*).[136] The fact that the *istiqsām* motif is not oft-encountered in the Prophet's biography[137] may allow us to entertain the idea that the *istiqsām* episode in the story of Badr might have its roots in the accounts of the sinful wars.

The next similarity is overtly stated in the *sīra* itself. In an attempt to incite the half-hearted ʿUtba b. Rabīʿa to desist from fighting with Muḥammad, Ḥakīm b. Ḥizām is reported as saying: "O, Abū al-Walīd, you are an elder of the Quraysh and their Lord, and command their obedience. What is there for you except to continue doing happily, among them, until the end of time, what you did on the day of ʿUkāẓ."[138] Here, the *sīra* goes beyond the covert borrowing from the tales of the sinful wars, divulging the source from which it draws its material. ʿUtba b. Rabīʿa is credited for his supposed role in the day of ʿUkāẓ, a battle day belonging to the series of *ḥurūb al-fijār*, where, after a bloody war, ʿUtba declaimed among the

**133** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 31–32.

**134** Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Munammaq* (1985), 170–171; Abū al-Faraj, *al-Aghānī*, XXII, 312.

**135** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), I, 18; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 33–34.

**136** Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Munammaq* (1985), 166; Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, 196.

**137** Apart from the Battle of Badr, I came up only with one occurrence of this word in al-Wāqidī's compendium, al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), II, 834.

**138** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), I, 33.

Quraysh: "O people of the Quraysh, for what reason are you killing yourselves ?" (*yā maʿshara Quraysh ʿalāma taqtulūna anfusakum*). He then started negotiations with both his fellow-Qurashīs and the chiefs of the Qays and successfully convinced them to give up the battle.[139] The same pacifying role has been attributed to ʿUtba in the narratives of Badr, where he is said to have exclaimed amidst his tribesmen, "O people of the Quraysh (*yā maʿshara Quraysh*), even if you achieve what you desire, surely we are not protecting those who stay behind (viz., women and children)."[140] He further exhorts the Quraysh not to slay their own kinsmen combating on the Muslim side.[141] Much as ʿUtba strives to maintain peace, Abū Jahl provokes the Quraysh, and even ʿUtba himself, to advance toward Badr.[142]

To conclude, the nature of the motif of caravan raid in the expeditions assessed thus far appears to be that of a literary *topos*, and this is particularly the case with the *sīra*'s account of the Battle of Badr, in which echoes of the tales of *ḥurūb al-fijār* abound. Seen in this light, the episode of caravan looting in the Badr story does not seem to speak in favor of the "continuation of this ancient Arabian practice,"[143] but merely denotes the reiteration of the *Erzählmotive* that shape the anecdotes of the sinful wars. This significant literary borrowing, along with the intense apologetic incentives that lie behind the *sīra*'s narratives, renders it of exceedingly little value as a straightforward historical testimony.

# After the Battle of Badr

## The Expeditions under the Command of Zayd b. Hāritha

Within the period between 3 and 6 AH, two caravan raids are said to have been led by Zayd b. Hāritha. The historicity of these expeditions, namely al-Qarada and al-ʿĪṣ,

**139** Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Munammaq* (1985), 178; Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *ʿUyūn al-Athar* (1993), I, 59.

**140** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), I, 20.

**141** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 63.

**142** Watt 1956, 11. The sources' vivid narration of ʿUtba's peacemaking efforts does not seem to be coincidental, being likely pro-Umayyad in predilection. Another rather positive depiction of the Umayyads' ancestors pertains, as Anthony observes, to Abū Sufyān who allegedly "remain[ed] unvanquished" in the face of the Prophet and managed to save the caravan, as opposed to "the heedless Abū Jahl" whom the tradition assigns a purely negative role. Some clue for the roots of this pro-Umayyad image is purveyed by the letter attributed to ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr that he reportedly wrote at the request of the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwān, a fact denoting the significance the Battle of Badr had for the Umayyad regime, Anthony 2020, 118–119.

**143** Landau-Tasseron 1995, 306.

has already been called into question by Crone, who saw these raids' stories as doublets. "It is hard to believe," according to her, "that the same commander twice intercepted a Meccan caravan loaded with the same commodity and manned by very much the same people."[144] Heck, however, is inclined to explain the parallels away, positing that within the Muslims' "ongoing series of armed military expeditions and raids," it is not unexpected to see "a frequent recurrence of common commodities, as well as of key individuals."[145] Notwithstanding the doubtful value of these reappearing elements, the problematic nature of the al-Qarada and al-ʿĪṣ accounts should not be relegated to the mere repetition in these stories of some individuals and commodities, for these narratives consist of nothing but *topoi*, as I hope to demonstrate.

Ibn Isḥāq's rather laconic account of the al-Qarada raid tells us that the Muslims' attempt to pillage the Quraysh's caravan before Badr and the ensuing conflict render the route to Syria almost impassable for the Meccans. Enmeshed in economic plight, they decide to travel through the road of Irāq, with a certain Furāt b. Ḥayyān acting as their guide. The Muslims, headed by Zayd b. Hāritha, intercept the caravan and capture its goods.[146] Al-Wāqidī provides us with several additions, pointing out how "Muḥammad learned through the indiscreet chatter of a Meccan drunk"[147] that a caravan is traversing the route of Irāq. Al-Wāqidī moves on to narrate the scene of the guide's coerced conversion, where Furāt, who has been taken prisoner by the Muslims, is given the choice between death and conversion. He converts and spares his life.[148]

The chief point to notice is that the historicity of the caravan raid at Badr, itself a literary *topos*, has been treated as an axiom in the account of al-Qarada. This makes this story as equally doubtful as that of Badr. The way in which the Prophet comes to know about the Meccan caravan is also a *topos*. The account of al-Qarada has it that Salīṭ b. al-Nuʿmān attends the gathering of the Jewish Kināna b. Abī al-Ḥuqayq and Nuʿaym b. Masʿūd, where the drunk Nuʿaym discloses secret information about the Quraysh's caravan, and then Salīṭ relays the news to the Prophet. It is difficult not to recall here the story of the al-Sawīq raid, in which we have an analogous assembly hosted by the Jewish Sallām b. Mishkam, who drinks wine with

**144** Crone 1987, 90. Add to these similarities the mention of Furāt b. Ḥayyān as the Meccans' guide in both stories, al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 198; *Ibid*., II, 554.

**145** Heck 2003, 552. See also Heck 2010, 104; and Ibrahim 1990, 91, where the al-ʿĪṣ raid is supposed as historical.

**146** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), II, 50; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (1967), II, 492.

**147** Donner 1977, 257.

**148** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 197–198.

Abū Sufyān and gives him news of the Prophet and his Companions.[149] Besides, the role of Nuʿaym b. Masʿūd in the al-Qarada account is painfully reminiscent of the story of the Battle of the Ditch, where the same Nuʿaym allegedly plays a pivotal part in conveying information between the Muslims and their adversaries.[150] And finally, the episode of Furāt's forced conversion is a transferrable one, recurring in the story of the Battle of the Ditch, where the polytheist Furāt converts under duress after being brought into captivity.[151] It is not rash to conclude that the story of al-Qarada is an amalgamation of certain literary *topoi*, one of which is the motif of caravan looting.

The account of the al-ʿĪṣ raid is of similar questionable content. While al-Wāqidī's story comes under the heading "the expedition of Zayd b. Hāritha to al-ʿĪṣ," it is the narration of the conversion of Abū al-ʿĀṣ b. al-Rabīʿ that encompasses the overwhelming majority of al-Wāqidī's account. Returning with a caravan from Syria, Abū al-ʿĀṣ is intercepted by Zayd and his fellow riders, who bring Abū al-ʿĀṣ to Medina, where he visits his wife, Muḥammad's daughter, Zaynab. The latter grants him protection; thus the Prophet lets him go back with the Quraysh's merchandise to Mecca. Having paid all his debts back to the Meccans, Abū al-ʿĀṣ declaims in midst of them, "I witness that there is no God but Allāh and that Muḥammad is His messenger." He further stresses the sincerity of his conversion, saying, "What prevented me from standing up in Medina was the fear that you would think that I converted because I had left with what was yours."[152] Ibn Hishām gives this episode the title, "a parable of the trustworthiness of Abū al-ʿĀṣ."[153] The story's ulterior motive is to extol Abū al-ʿĀṣ, and in so doing to present a justification for his rather late conversion in the sixth year AH. The *topos* of the caravan raid has been deployed merely to fill a void in the opening section of the report, being a prelude for bringing Abū al-ʿĀṣ to Medina and for relaying the romanticized tale of his conversion. The thoroughly marginal status of the motif of caravan looting, and the central prominence of the conversion episode, is attested to by Ibn Isḥāq's report, which falls under the rubric of "the conversion to Islam of Abū al-ʿĀṣ" and omits

**149** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), II, 44; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), I, 181. The *topos* of drunkenness warns against the moral recklessness and legal irresponsibility after drinking alcohol. See in this regards Abū Ghabshān selling the keys of the Kaʿba to Quṣayy b. Kilāb for a skin of wine, al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (1967), II, 256.

**150** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), II, 229–230; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), II, 481–492; al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil* (1985), III, 445–446.

**151** Ibn Ḥajar, *al-Iṣāba* (1995), V, 273. Elsewhere he is said to have been a spy (*ʿayn*) for Abū Sufyān, having been captured by Muslims while conducting a spying mission, Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* (1969), IV, 336; al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-Kamāl* (1985), XXIII, 147.

**152** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), II, 272.

**153** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), I, 659.

any mention of Zayd's commandership.[154] Mūsā b. ʿUqba's account further substantiates the notion that the alleged attack on Abū al-ʿĀṣ' caravan merely serves as a tool to propel the idealized anecdote of his conversion. Mūsā b. ʿUqba situates the story in the context of the rebellious movement of Abū Baṣīr al-Thaqafī, claiming that Abū al-ʿĀṣ was taken prisoner by Abū Baṣīr, who then set him free due to his kinship with the Prophet. Abū al-ʿĀṣ is said here to have subsequently gone to Medina, and from this point onwards the story is similar to those of Ibn Isḥāq and al-Wāqidī.[155] The conversion episode, as one may readily observe, "roams" between different historical frameworks. To the early tradents, it hardly mattered in which raid Abū al-ʿĀṣ was taken prisoner: in an unspecified expedition, in a *sariyya* led by Zayd, or in an incursion by Abū Baṣīr. *Any* caravan raid, commanded by *anyone*, would have fulfilled their aim. It is highly problematic, then, to deem these materials as historical evidence.

## The Hostile Activities of Muḥammad's Formal and Informal Allies

The antagonistic actions of the Prophet's formal and informal allies have been reckoned as the two main pillars on which Muḥammad's supposed "boycott of Mecca" stood.[156] "During one of the many raids" sent by the Prophet, the Muslim riders bring Thumāma b. Uthāl al-Ḥanafī into captivity. He is said to have been traveling to Mecca "to perform the pilgrimage."[157] As it turns out, Thumāma does not merely convert to Islam and enter into Muḥammad's formal alliance, but he becomes such a devout partisan of him who "interdict[s] the flow of supplies (*mīra*) from al-Yamāma to the Meccans," attempting thereby to "starve the Meccans into submission."[158] Constituting the crux of Donner's hypothesis about al-Yamāma imposing a boycott on Mecca,[159] this report is the more famous version of Thumāma's story. It does not follow, however, that it is the genuine portrayal. Let us revisit our other utopian scene of conversion, that of Thumāma. Notwithstanding his hatred against Islam in the first hours of his captivity, Thumāma very soon becomes convinced of the truth of Muḥammad's prophetic mission. He then purifies himself in a perfect

**154** *Ibid*., 657; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (1967), II, 470. Abū al-ʿĀṣ is said in this recension to have been met by (*laqiyathu*) a *sariyya* dispatched by the Prophet.
**155** al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil* (1985), IV, 174.
**156** Donner 1977, 264–265.
**157** *Ibid*., 262; Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Istīʿāb* (1992), I, 214; al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾi* (1985), IV, 78.
**158** Donner 1977, 262–263.
**159** The theory, as said above, has been acknowledged by Kister and Rubin.

manner (*taṭahhara fa-aḥsana ṭuhūrahu*), goes to Mecca, and responds to the people that accuse him of reneging on his religion[160] that he has embraced Islam because Muḥammad's faith is superior amongst all religions. He threatens the Meccans: "By God, not one kernel of wheat from al-Yamāma will come to you until the Prophet permits it."[161] We possess more evidence to the effect that Thumāma was on cordial terms with the Prophet, like the account of Sayf b. ʿUmar that claims that Thumāma is the Prophet's governor of al-Yamāma,[162] or a report based on which Muḥammad sends Furāt b. Ḥayyān to assist Thumāma in his battle against Musaylima.[163]

Rival depictions of Thumāma's affair lead us to take *cum grano salis* his purported partisanship of the Prophet. Ibn Ḥubaysh informs us that Thumāma was captured *not* on his way to perform pilgrimage in Mecca but rather due to his plot to kill Muḥammad.[164] The alteration of Thumāma from a conspirator to Muḥammad's ardent follower is almost definitely a pious invention to "purify" Thumāma. He possibly owes the correction in the tradition of his image to his aiding the Muslim army during the climactic moments of the *ridda* (apostasy) wars. When Khālid b. al-Walīd's troops reach al-Yamāma, it is reported, a "small splinter" of Banū Ḥanīfa, led by Thumāma, antagonizes Musaylima and attends a clandestine negotiation with Khālid, where Thumāma demands protection (*ista'mana*) from Khālid and the latter ensures him that he and his followers will remain safe and are permitted to join the Muslims.[165] According to this recension, it is only after the Prophet's death that Thumāma rises to a high status within the Islamic state. This stands in sharp contrast with Thumāma's otherwise close relationship with the Prophet. How can one envisage that Muḥammad's governor would have had to ask protection from Khālid? A logical supposition presents itself: that the idealized story of Thumāma's conversion during Muḥammad's lifetime is a pious fabrication intended to burnish the image of Thumāma who, on account of intratribal conflict among the Banū Ḥanīfa, leaned toward the Muslims and "played a useful role" on the Muslim side during the so-called wars of apostasy.[166] The only thing in Thumāma-related material that *may* not be a later retrojection to the Prophet's time is his conspiracy against Muḥammad, a point that is less favorable to the protagonist. Worth highlighting is that the case of Thumāma is not *sui generis* amongst the

**160** The Meccans said to him, *a-ṣabawta*, which is a satiric way of mentioning Thumāma's conversion to Islam.

**161** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), II, 638–639; Donner 1977, 262; Kister 2002, 10.

**162** al-Maqrīzī, *Imtāʿ al-Asmāʾ* (1999), XIV, 536; Kister 2002, 11.

**163** al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (1967), III, 187; Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Istīʿāb* (1992), III, 1258.

**164** Ibn Ḥubaysh, *al-Ghazawāt* (1983), 83–84.

**165** al-Wāqidī, *al-Ridda* (1990), 116–117; Ibn al-Aʿtham, *al-Futūḥ* (1991), I, 24–25.

**166** Shoufani 1972, 31.

members of the Banū Ḥanīfa. A certain Ibn ʿUmayr al-Yashkurī is said to have left Musaylima's camp, informed Khālid of the condition of the people of al-Yamāma, and guided him to their weakest points (*dallahu ʿalā ʿawrātihim*).[167] Ibn ʿUmayr is presented in the sources in the most positive light, a devoted believer who used to live as a crypto-Muslim amidst the Ḥanīfa, but openly proclaims his faith upon the arrival of Khālid's troops.

Having revealed the underlying motivation of our reports, we shall take a fresh look at the historicity of Thumāma boycotting Mecca. The sources make reference to the blockade of Mecca's food in the context of Thumāma's ornamented and highly artificial conversion tale. This makes the claim of Thumāma's cutting off Mecca's "life-blood" no less questionable than his alleged conversion during the Prophet's life. Thumāma's vituperative oration in the face of the pagan Meccans, his boasting of his conversion to Islam, and his threatening the Quraysh with blocking food imports from al-Yamāma all represent propagandist efforts to efface Thumāma's "sordid" past, changing him from the assailant of Muḥammad to his staunch ally. And all these are given to him as remuneration for his influential role during the *ridda* wars. One should bear in mind that the boycott of Mecca was beyond the limited jurisdiction of Thumāma, being under the authority of Hawdha b. ʿAlī, "the strongest man in central Arabia,"[168] and to a lesser extent, Musaylima. But the "much inferior"[169] status of Thumāma in comparison with other Ḥanafī leaders, particularly Hawdha, is entirely ignored in Thumāma's conversion account, which is meant only to exalt Thumāma.[170] Besides, "the sources do not in general envisage Mecca and the Yamāma as closely linked until after the conquests," as Crone observes.[171] Finally, it is significant to know that what shapes the account of Thumāma's conversion is certain transferrable *Erzählmotive* that appear with analogous content and similar diction in the story of Abū Baṣīr al-Thaqafī. This is what I will treat in the following lines. In sum, all our evidence points to the fact that the story of the boycott of Mecca by Thumāma is to be discarded as a pious invention.

**167** Ibn Ḥubaysh, *al-Ghazawāt* (1983), 81–83; al-Kalāʿī, *al-Iktifāʾ* (1420 AH), II, 114.

**168** Watt 1956, 133. See also Shoufani 1972, 84.

**169** Watt 1956, 133.

**170** We have no hint that Hawdha and Musaylima would have been inclined to block Mecca's food. Of these men, the latter was to become Islam's most formidable foe in the *ridda*, and the former's attitude toward Islam was not cordial. Hawdha's name is cited among those "kings" whom the Prophet sent letters to, inviting them to Islam. Even if we are to believe this account, Hawdha's answers to Muḥammad's letter, as is recorded by our sources, was "anything but satisfactory," Shoufani 1972, 29.

**171** Crone 1987, 153.

The Prophet's last set of hostile acts against Meccan commerce were reportedly carried out by "a group of Muslim highwaymen" (known as the *mustaḍʿafūn*) in the period following the al-Ḥudaybiyya truce.[172] These men, led by Abū Baṣīr al-Thaqafī and Abū Jandal b. Suhayl b. ʿAmr, are said to have been some molested Meccan Muslims who, owing to the al-Ḥudaybiyya treaty's extradition clause, were thwarted from formally joining the Prophet at Medina. This prompted them to escape their prisons in Mecca, gather at al-ʿĪṣ, and pillage the Quraysh's caravans, thereby compelling the starved Meccans "to come to terms with the Prophet."[173] The literary *topoi* embedded in this story and their ulterior tendencies have not hitherto received due attention. An analogy of this story's narrative motifs with those of Thumāma's conversion account would reveal that our stories' protagonists (Abū Baṣīr and his band *vis-à-vis* Thumāma) are, in fact, contenders for one and the same "virtue." In other words, while the previous scholarship sees the affairs of Abū Baṣīr and Thumāma as two aspects of a single calculated plan to "starve the Meccans into submission,"[174] the assessment of our stories' *Erzählmotive* and their biases denotes that the disseminators of each story, basing themselves on a common pool of *topoi*, made the same claim of delivering a crushing blow on the Meccan polytheists and bringing about their conversion.[175] The fierce dealing of the protagonist(s) with the Quraysh and his/their *Schadenfreude* over the Meccans' misery is common to both stories. As for Thumāma, it is alleged that he cut off the Meccans' food supplies (*qaṭaʿa ʿannā mīratanā*),[176] and regarding Abū Baṣīr and his companions, we also read that they severed the Meccans' supplies (*qaṭaʿū ʿalā Quraysh māddatahum*).[177] Both events are said to have been accompanied by the Quraysh sending Abū Sufyān to visit the Prophet at Medina.[178] And in both stories, there is an invocation by the Meccans of their kinship with Muḥammad (as regards Thumāma we read: *innaka qaṭaʿta arḥāmanā,* or *innaka ta'muru bi ṣilat al-raḥim*,[179] and on Abū Baṣīr we have: *yasʾalūnahu bi arḥāmihim*).[180] Concerning the stories'

**172** Donner 1979, 244.

**173** Donner 1977, 264; Rubin 1988, 254.

**174** Donner 1977, 263–265; Rubin 1988, 254.

**175** The Meccan famine of which these reports makes mention, if it existed at all, was a natural phenomenon to which the early tradents gave a supernatural tinge and used as a tool to fashion their own stories.

**176** Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Istīʿāb* (1992), I, 215.

**177** al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil* (1985), IV, 173, 176; al-Kalāʿī, *al-Iktifāʾ* (1420 AH), I, 475.

**178** al-Thaʿlabī, *al-Kashf wa al-Bayān* (1422 AH), VII, 53; al-Qurtubī, *al-Jāmiʾ li Aḥkām al-Qurʾān* (1985), XII, 143; al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil*, IV, 176; Also see Kister 1981, 249–250.

**179** Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), II, 639; Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Istīʿāb* (1992), I, 215; al-Qurtubī, *al-Jāmiʾ li Aḥkām al-Qurʾān* (1985), XII, 143; Ibn Shabba, *Taʾrīkh al-Madīna* (1410 AH), II, 438.

**180** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), II, 629; Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (1971), II, 324.

underlying motives, it appears that like the case of Thumāma, the tale of Abū Baṣīr was intended to vindicate people of unsavory or questionable background, as I shall describe later.

What further depreciates the historical value of the account of Abū Baṣīr and his companions is that their supposed daring exploits are the "incarnation" of a much similar feat assigned elsewhere to Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, whom the sources depict as the paragon of temerity. Following his conversion, Abū Dharr is reported to have stayed at ʿUsfān, where he intercepted every Meccan caravan that carried food, then confiscated their wheat (*ḥinaṭ*), intimidated them into professing the oneness of God, and proclaimed: "No one among you is permitted to touch even one kernel [of wheat] (*ḥabba*) until he says 'There is no God but Allāh!'"[181] This is redolent of the exploits for the cause of Islam of Abū Baṣīr and his band, about whom we are told: "A caravan did not pass, but they took possession of it, until they hurt the Quraysh."[182] Furthermore, Abū Dharr seizing the wheat of the Quraysh following his conversion is evocative of the aftermath of Thumāma's conversion, when he is said to have warned the Meccans that, "By God, not one kernel of wheat (*ḥabbatu ḥinṭatin*) from al-Yamāma will come to you until the Prophet permits."[183] As can be seen, the stereotyped and embroidered theme of a Muslim expressing his fervent devotion to Islam through menacing the Quraysh's commerce, particularly the food trade, is an oft-repeated one in the *sīra.*[184] This may cast serious doubts on the historicity of such claims. In the case of the *mustaḍʿafūn*, there are yet other clues as to the spurious character of their anecdote, like the mournful end of the story of Abū Baṣīr, who, despite all the tribulations he suffered for the sake of Islam, dies exactly at the moment that he receives the Prophet's letter informing Abū Baṣīr that the *mustaḍʿafūn* can live free and unharmed in Medina with their coreligionists. Abū Baṣīr allegedly meets his death "while Muḥammad's letter was in his hand," and his comrade, al-Walīd b. al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra dies shortly afterward, upon his arrival at Medina.[185] Logical absurdities and implausibly also taint this story. Even allowing for exaggeration and the deployment of "numerical symbolism," one may reasonably have difficulty believing the virtually simultaneous "prison break" of a large number (70, according to one report, or 300, according to another) of

**181** Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt* (1990), IV, 169; al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf* (1996), XI, 125.

**182** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), II, 308.

**183** Donner 1977, 262; al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil* (1985), IV, 79; al-Qurtubī, *al-Jāmiʾ li Aḥkām al-Qurʾān* (1985), XII, 143.

**184** Also see Saʿd b. Muʿādh threatening the Meccans' trade due to his zeal for Islam, al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil* (1985), III, 25; Kister 1965b, 135.

**185** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), II, 629; al-Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil* (1985), II, 175; al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh* (1967), XI, 532.

the imprisoned Meccan *mustaḍʿaf*s.[186] Even a perfunctory glance at the names of the *mustaḍʿafūn* would disclose that all of them, even Abū Baṣīr himself, were the sons of the most implacable adversaries of Muḥammad, or rather belonged to such clans/tribes as Makhzūm and Thaqīf, which were notorious for their bitter and long-standing rancor against Islam.[187] This may represent efforts to salvage their images. The conversion scene of al-Walīd b. al-Walīd evidently shows such attempts. Having fought the Battle of Badr at the Quraysh's side, al-Walīd is taken prisoner by ʿAbd Allāh b. Jaḥsh. Subsequently, al-Walīd's brothers come with his ransom and release him. When reaching Dhū l-Ḥulayfa, al-Walīd escapes, goes to Muḥammad, and professes Islam, announcing, "I did not convert until I was ransomed, lest the Quraysh say he joined Muḥammad in order not to pay the ransom."[188] Al-Walīd's enthusiasm to join Muḥammad notwithstanding, his tribesmen take him to Mecca and confine him in prison.[189] The way in which the tradition tries to articulate the sincerity of al-Walīd's conversion is very similar to what we find in the account of Abū al-ʿĀṣ b. al-Rabī's conversion, being a typical way of justifying a problematic fact in a Companion's life (here, al-Walīd's fighting against the Muslims at Badr). To recapitulate, the heroic deeds assigned to, and the excruciating torments in the cause of Islam endured by, the historically obscure *mustaḍʿafūn* appear in general to be later concoctions aimed at cleaning up the image of the tribes that were infamous for their enmity toward emergent Islam.[190]

It is appropriate to say a word or two concerning the historical context of the period during which the boycott of Mecca is supposed to have occurred. Donner insinuates that the blockade of Mecca might have taken place during the period between the conquests of Khaybar and Mecca.[191] For Rubin, the boycott pertains to the immediate aftermath of the al-Ḥudaybiyya treaty. According to him, follow-

**186** al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), II, 308: "The Meccan Muslims tried to creep away, man by man, until they reached Abū Baṣīr."

**187** Abū Baṣīr, ʿUtba b. Asīd b. Jāriya (Ḥāritha) was the son of the Thaqafī leader, Asīd, who, along with the other tribal leaders (known as "Those whose hearts are reconciled"), while "either still pagans or recent converts to Islam," received one hundred camels from the spoils of the battle of Ḥunayn, al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (1989), III, 946; Watt 1956, 348; Lecker 2005, 88. On Abū Baṣīr's pedigree, see Ibn Ḥajar, *al-Iṣāba* (1995), I, 231. On Thaqīf's deep-seated antagonism toward Islam, see Lecker 2005, 87.

**188** Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt* (1990), VIII, 123; al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī* (2013), I, 71.

**189** Anthony 2009, 581.

**190** Once more, the portion of ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr's account of the al-Ḥudaybiyya truce that contains the affairs of Abū Baṣīr and Abū Jandal sounds far from a reliable historical source. However, it seems not to be wise to generalize from this negative observation and refute all ʿUrwa's traditions as spurious. On the episode of Abū Baṣīr and Abū Jandal as parts of ʿUrwa's corpus, see Görke 2000, 259.

**191** Donner 1979, 246.

ing the combined hostile activities of Thumāma and Abū Baṣīr/Abū Jandal, Abū Sufyān visits the Prophet at Medina, where "an agreement was reached, according to which Mecca was to get a share in the spoils of Khaybar in return for its remaining neutral during Muḥammad's campaign to Khaybar."[192] As Lecker has cogently shown, it was the al-Ḥudaybiyya truce (and not the purported boycott of Mecca and the visit between Abū Sufyān and Muḥammad) that "played a crucial role in Khaybar's defeat."[193] Being reckoned as the *pièce de résistance* amongst Muḥammad's political achievements, the al-Ḥudaybiyya pact was in fact a *modus vivendi* that rendered Mecca innocuous to Medina during the expedition of Khaybar, and it was for this purpose that Muḥammad gave the Quraysh "grave concessions."[194] Disrupting the Meccan trade in the circumstances when peace was to be established would have been an inconceivably asinine thing to have done by a political leader. It would have easily sown seeds of strife between the Muslims and the disgruntled Meccans and would have been of enormously deleterious consequences to the non-belligerency pact of which Muḥammad was in overwhelming need. All in all, our evidence for the alleged blockade of Mecca, which is comprised of hardly anything beyond a patchwork of recurrent literary motifs and suspicious mythologizing, cannot be deemed a secure and credible source material for historical inquiry.

## Conclusion

The quest in the *sīra* for unearthing the reasons for Islam's prosperity, as we have seen, is in no way a simple errand. The traditional biography of the Prophet upon which we have to rely heavily is a late and slanted source in which literary tools are rife. To elucidate the backdrop against which Islam was born and flourished, we must be fully aware of this source-critical problem, a point whose absence seems to have impinged on the hypotheses assessed in this article. Far from being a reliable source for the history of seventh-century Arabia, the *sīra* represents the needs and concerns of eighth- and ninth-century Islamic society.[195] The wide chasm of a century or so that separated Muḥammad's biographers and the events they describe, along with their politico-sectarian agendas, have made the *sīra* an accumulation of *topoi* deployed to glorifying or apologetic ends, or, at times, simply to fill a void.

**192** Rubin 1988, 252–256.
**193** Lecker 1984, 8.
**194** *Ibid*., 2.
**195** Pavlovitch 2017, 66; Anthony 2020, 2–3.

As has been examined, the suppression or distortion of the poignant and problematic realities concerning the Companions counts among the crucial functions of the literary tools. This gains special prominence in the family accounts. The expeditions that have Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ as their protagonist are excellent examples in this regard. Among the family traditions, such raids as al-Qarada, allegedly headed by Zayd b. Hāritha, appear to be comprised of nothing but reoccurring motifs, being an "undifferentiated report" (*Indifferente Berichte*) that may well be an *ex nihilo* invention.[196] Moreover, we have the *awāʾil*-type accounts whose existence we may owe to the early tradents' rivalries, political or otherwise. In all these instances, the traditional materials sound almost worthless as straightforward evidence.

The other observation that calls for comment is the phenomenon that may be termed "apologetic harshness." The fierceness that Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ exhibits toward the pagan Quraysh and the deep hostility that Thumāma b. Uthāl bears toward the Meccans for Islam's sake are literary stereotypes that serve to substantiate these Companions' commitment to Islam and to expunge or neutralize, thereby, the matters of unease in their lives. This fictitious harshness may account in part for the point that Donner properly observes in one of his more recent works – that "the later literary sources [...] often tend to portray things in a much harsher light than do the documentary sources."[197] One can enumerate the boycott of Mecca and the proliferation of caravan lootings in the *sīra* as the manifestations of this "apologetic harshness." As regards the caravan raids, Landau-Tasseron contends that "later generations would not have invented accounts showing the Prophet's role in operations in which material gain was the main or only outcome."[198] This essay's literary approach demonstrated, on the contrary, that "Muḥammad's image" was not always the early tradents' foremost concern. When tribal or family interests were at work, the traditionists might have occasionally been "indifferent" to *anything* other than eulogizing their progenitors[199] or redeeming their forebears' memory, as Lecker once highlighted.[200] Had the early traditionists understood the attribution to the Prophet of caravan looting as a matter of discomfort, the number of caravan raids would most likely have undergone a decline in the period between Ibn Isḥāq and al-Wāqidī. In reality, however, the situation was vice versa. This further indicates

**196** See Noth/Conrad 1994, 204–218; Donner 1998, 266.

**197** Donner 2017, 189.

**198** Landau-Tasseron 1995, 303–304.

**199** Note that the mere point of having been dispatched by the Prophet to a *sariyya* would have been considered a tribal glory, see Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt* (1990), I, 226, and this very fact seems to have been sufficient for the proliferation of the historically doubtful expeditions in the Prophet's life.

**200** Lecker 2011, 182.

that the "exponential" growth of the caravan raids in al-Wāqidī's work is grounded in the politico-sectarian agendas of later Muslims, who may sometimes be unconcerned about the Prophet's image. Moreover, while the first, ʿAbbāsid-era compilers of the Prophet's biography based themselves on the materials, many of which were of late-Umayyad origin,[201] these earliest *sīra* scholars would also have enacted their own policies through their (not often so) extensive modifications, appropriations, and selections of the material at their disposal.[202] The notion of the pugnacious and all-powerful Islam that al-Wāqidī expresses through portraying many of the early expeditions as offensive, more specifically as caravan raids, might then have its provenance in the normative views on *jihād* in al-Wāqidī's time.[203]

The appraisal of the traditional materials from the viewpoint of the literary devices they contain corroborates further the view that the "beginnings of Islam were in fact quite different from how these later sources remember it."[204] This leaves us with our (near-)contemporary evidence, primarily the Qurʾān, as the main, if not always so promising, avenue for Islamic origins.[205] The traditional Islamic sources must only be consulted to the extent that they are in line with our documentary evidence. In many cases, however, there would be no panacea for the lateness and tendentiousness of the *sīra*. For what we have to do with (e. g., in each individual report of caravan raids) is a "conglomeration" of *topoi* that appears elsewhere and can hardly, if at all, bring us to unvarnished realities about the early Islamic incidents. Even the "kernel of truth" argument does not seem to work as the outcomes it provides have been convincingly shown by Noth/Conrad to be "distinctly unhelpful" for historians.[206] The result in most (though perhaps not all) of the cases is, then, not better than an agnosticism about "what really happened," and the hopes for illuminating each of the individual events narrated in the tradition is crushed. "Perhaps the event has an unassailable truth. God saw it. God knows. But I am not God."[207]

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**201** Anthony 2014, 34.

**202** See, for instance, Lecker, 1995b, 15–32; Faizer 1999, 97–106; Teipen 2020, 543–568.

**203** See Firestone 1999, 114.

**204** Shoemaker 2011, 258.

**205** This is not nonetheless to endorse the full implications of the theories propounded on the basis of the documentary material. On the prominence of the Muslim and non-Muslim (near-)contemporary testimonies see, for example, Hoyland 2000, 277; Shoemaker 2017, 59; Lindstedt 2020, 411–437, Anthony 2020, 11.

**206** Noth/Conrad 1994, 22.

**207** The quotation is from Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*: "And when I look at a history book and think of the imaginative effort it has taken to squeeze this oozing world between two boards and typeset, I am astonished. Perhaps the event has an unassailable truth. God saw it. God knows. But I am not God." Also quoted in Hoyland 2006, 16.

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